Igbo Masquerade Drama and the Origin of Theatre: A Comparative Synthesis

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Abstract
Studies on the origin of theatre have tended to concentrate on western theatre disregarding, sometimes completely, non-western theatrical practices. When studies are carried out on third world theatre, scholars tend to refer to it as ritual which requires more development before it can be perceived as theatre. Researches carried out on non-western theatre by theatre scholars have, unfortunately, not been given the kind of recognition they deserve, while studies on western theatre have been made to assume a somewhat 'universal' recognition.
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ARGUMENTUM

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Unfortunately, African scholars and critics interested in African drama have not given the issue of African masquerade drama enough attention. They tend to lump all African festivals together, sometimes only establishing unity in diversity. No concrete effort has been made to synthesize the origin of theatre with particular African festivals or traditional performances, thus creating a lacuna in knowledge regarding this important area of traditional African drama. It is the interest in filling this lacuna that prompted this investigation. This paper, therefore, attempts to examine important works done on the origins of theatre, including pertinent empirical investigations, and evaluate their relationship with the origins of Igbo masquerade drama. A critical appraisal of Igbo masquerade drama by an empirical investigator and participant-observer would reveal that it may have followed the same method of origination and development of ritual as theatre. Thus the same reasons that account for the origin of theatre may have accounted for the origin of Igbo masquerade performances. For this study, therefore, the writer has not only relied on content analyses of existing empirical investigations, but also carried out empirical research on the masquerade drama, and
initiated into the masquerade society (the collective incarnate dead), to gain intellectual insight into the performances as a participant-observer.

**RITUAL TO CULT**

The origin of the masquerade in Igbo history cannot be fully discerned without taking into consideration the situations that created the need for the evolution of the masquerade. To make this discussion clearer, a brief excursion into the origin of theatre is necessary. This discussion will not be concerned with the literary developments of drama but with the origin of theatre as enactment.

Sir James Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, discusses some characteristic archetypes in primitive vegetation magic which, he believes, led the way to the origin of theatre. Frazer believes that primitive men first noticed the forces that affected their existence and, because they could not clearly understand the forces that controlled aspects of their existence, attributed them to supernatural forces, and began to devise ways of appealing to these forces for their own benefit. According to Frazer,

Year by year in his own beautiful land (the ancient Greek) beheld, with natural regret, the bright pomp of summer fading into the gloom and stagnation of winter, and year by year he hailed with natural delight the outburst of fresh life in spring. Accustomed to personify the forces of nature, to tinge her cold abstractions with the warm hues of imagination, to clothe her naked realities with the gorgeous drapery of mythic fancy, he fashioned for himself a train of gods and goddesses, of spirits and elves, out of the annual fluctuations of their fortunes with alternate emotions of cheerfulness and dejection, of gladness and sorrow, which found their natural expression in alternative rites of rejoicing and lamentation, of revelry and mourning.¹

When they became properly perfected and organized into legitimate and scientific ritual, primitive men began to achieve their aim — to communicate to the audience. Thus, the primitive men who carried out the rituals became the actors and the supernatural forces they set out to communicate to became their audience. Just like we do theatre today to appeal to an audience and get their response, so primitive men performed their ritual to appeal to their audience who, in this case, were supernatural forces, to obtain or achieve something. Benjamin Hunningher, one of the major investigators on the origins of theatre, recaptures this fact when he maintains that
Through often repeated communal and mimetic dance-ritual, the tribes did everything they could to attract new life which they longed to receive. As soon as the spring appeared in nature the entire community hurried to welcome it and strengthen its power by an elaborate representation of its victory over winter and summer. The battle between winter and summer is of primary importance in the development of primitive religion as well as of the theatre. Frazer's numerous examples demonstrate how, through annual repetition of these rites, the idea of a definite seasonal change retires to the background and winter-in-general gradually opposes summer-in-general, death opposes life... From this concept arose the performance of the year-king or year-priest, known over the whole world, who overcomes death to bring life. With the approach of winter the year-king himself turns into the daemon of death and must perish in a duel with the champion or king of the next year for life to spring forth anew.  

Frazer's work was the first to focus the attention of academics to the fact that theatre may have originated from the ritual practices of ancient people, and must have led Susan Langer and Northrop Frye into coining their theories of describing literary genres as if they were structured by the rhythms of seasonal change.

It is pertinent to discern which of the ritual practices of the ancient people helped in the origin of theatre. Another investigation into the origin of theatre which attempted to answer this important question was carried out by William Ridgeway. He located various forms of drama, mainly from non-western religious sects, to produce a work 'which has remained the only work to concentrate at all upon the origins of non-western theatre'. Ridgeway, after locating these various forms of drama, placed them within their cultural contexts and finally came to the conclusion that theatre, in all cultures, has its origin in the worship of the dead. His study, concluded in 1915, 'was the first work of its kind in the English language', and was the author's attempt to apply the use of empirical research in the study of origins in an age dominated by theories.

The very next year after Ridgeway's study was concluded, Loomis Havemeyer completed his own investigation into the origin of theatre. Havemeyer's sample consisted of a survey of ceremonies — hunting ceremonies, initiation ceremonies, rainmaking ceremonies, war ceremonies, and pleasure plays. His conclusion was that theatre originated through man's desire to imitate. This desire, Havemeyer maintains, is an instinct which is also found in animals and children's play. Because gesture preceded spoken language, Havemeyer seems to suggest, instinct to imitate thus arose as a necessity when the need to supplement verbal communication became paramount. His conclusion, therefore, is 'that
the desire to imitate is a universal human trait, although it does not appear to the same degree among all races of men.  

Though Havemeyer concluded that human instinct to imitate caused the origin of theatre, one notices that instinct is not action, and that drama does not exist without action. This may have instigated E.T. Kirby to carry the study a step further. Though Kirby studied different forms of theatre including the Shamanistic theatre, the Deamon play of India, the Chinese acrobats, and the Noh drama, his conclusion does not deviate much from those already established by Havemeyer, except that Kirby tends to establish, through examples, how the need for imitation has continued to cause the birth and rebirth of theatre from Shamanism to the quem queritis trope.

Colin Turnbull is another empirical researcher whose work is considered ‘one of the best ethnographic studies for theatre people’. Turnbull’s study was carried out among primitive people, particularly the BaMbuti tribe of central Africa. Turnbull not only studied the BaMbuti tribe through observation and content analysis of their ceremonies, but made friends with them and found out answers to most of the questions of origin. By linking their statement of reasons for the enactment in the various ceremonies with the content analysis of the ceremonies, Turnbull was able to establish that the origin of theatre was not only instinct (man’s desire to communicate through imitation) but also man’s attempt to achieve some utilitarian benefits.

From the foregoing, we notice that man’s ability to notice the forces that affected his existence was the first phase in the origin of theatre. Awareness of the existence of these forces caused primitive men to look for means of controlling, wooing, or even bribing those forces through ritual activities. Through these devices, they began to perceive some connections between the rituals they performed and the eventual outcome of their activities. Thus they began to sift the activities to discern which ones had utility.

Since the rituals performed by primitive men were varied, it is necessary to pin down the particular ritual that caused the birth of theatre. Human instinct and the desire to imitate may have generated the need for the origin of theatre, but it was not until this desire was put into action that ‘cult’ theatre was born.
CULT TO THEATRE

The major enactment that caused theatre to originate, it seems, was the worship of the dead. While Frazer talks of ‘cultures in which the effective spirits (or gods) are identified as ancestors’, Ridgeway emphatically maintains, through empirical research, that worship of dead ancestors caused the origin of theatre. He states that the actor was merely a medium for this origination, citing examples from the nat-kadaws (translated nat-wives) of Burma who, according to Ridgeway, acted as if they were possessed by ‘spirit husbands’ who have been given identity as spirits. Ancestral worship was a form of ritual whose performance required dramatic action, but which was not intended to entertain an audience. Science and intellect punctured the belief system that held the ritual together and thus moved it to theatre.

THE IGBO CASE

Empirical investigation in Igboland and participant-observation of masquerade performances also reveal that Igbo masquerade drama originated from ancestral worship. The Igbos believe that a dead man travels to the land of the ancestors from where he reincarnates into the world. Prominent men, the Igbos also believe, especially those who were brave and who performed great feats during their life time, could reincarnate and still retain their prominence and status among the ancestors. These are the brand of ancestors that were invoked as masquerades.

Igbo ancestors who were believed to be responsible for the founding of different areas of Igboland were invoked when their services were needed by the living. Since the Igbos believe that supernatural forces cannot be directly communicated with, they invite the ancestors to intercede for them, if need be. When a plague or misfortune visited the Igbo society, for instance, it was believed that such unfortunate situations were caused by supernatural forces unknown to the living but quite familiar to the dead. The ancestors were thus invited and appealed to in order that they would help to communicate the wishes of the living to the supernatural.

In the earliest period of Igbo history, the ancestors were consulted through divination, but later their physical presence became necessary when further rituals were evolved. The need for physical representation of the ancestor created the necessity to devise ways of representing the physical presence of the ancestral spirit. It was this situation that led to
the evolution of the masquerader as a dramatic character. One therefore sees the relationship between Ridgeway’s thesis and the origin of Igbo masquerade drama. Supporting the result of Ridgeway’s empirical research, Kirby observes that

Ridgeway’s concept could seem to be supported, in a sense, by examples and information which have been developed since his time, such as the number of cultures in which the effective spirits (or gods) are identified as ancestors, or the use of ancestor masks for performances and for social control in Africa. \(^{12}\)

The exact date of the evolution of the masquerade is unknown, and since no written records were kept in the ancient Igbo society, dating the origin of the masquerade remains a matter of speculation. From archaeological evidence, however, it appears that the masquerade must have evolved some time before 2555 BC and must have come into perfection and acquired uniform presentational ritual in many areas of Igboland by the 9th century AD. Archaeological excavations in Igboland\(^{13}\) have yielded carbon-14 dates which suggest that the earliest known pottery in Igboland existed around 2555 BC. Ancestor worship is believed to have pre-dated the discovery of pottery in Igboland, thus the masquerade must have evolved before this date. In northern Igbo areas, figures of the ancestors were drawn on the pots.

Ancestor worship among the Nri-Igbo started with the death of the first Eze Nri who, according to the tradition of origin, was sent from the sky by Chukwu, God above. The first masquerade in Igboland must, therefore, have been a personification of Eri. Because of this divine connection, subsequent heirs ascending to this throne, before coronation, were caused to face ritual death. They were subsequently buried for some hours before they were resurrected to assume the onerous office. \(^{14}\) The children of Eri, whose offspring made up several areas of Igboland, used him as a medium to communicate to Chukwu. As time went on the children of Eri began to die and, as the Igbos believe, went to the land of the dead to meet their ancestor. When more people died and joined the ancestral stock, the population of the ancestors increased. This created the need to identify the particular ancestor being invoked. Thus, the ancestors were given names and personified in the form of one kind of masquerade or another. In Igboland, therefore, the masquerade ‘gives expression to the bond between a group of people and their ancestors’. \(^{15}\)

The revered ancestors were deemed to have certain attributes which marked them out from the others and which made the society see them as saviours in a particular situation. By invoking the ancestral spirit, the
memory of an ancestor is crystalized into an idea which is personified by the masquerade. The ancestral spirits were invoked according to the reason for which their services were sought by the living. Therefore, one can comfortably submit that the evolution of the masquerade cult was effected by the second generation of the early Igbo people.

The masquerade performance was forced to lose its efficacy when the ritual that sustained it was punctured by alien intervention. Both internal and external forces contributed to the transition of Igbo masquerade performances from cult to theatre. These forces include slave trade and slave raids, effects of missionary enterprises in Igboland, effects of colonization, and the destructive effects of political appointments by the colonial administration. The shift from cult to theatre was not achieved merely by stripping the rituals of their mythic, religious, and social components. The transition was not completed until professional groups took over the performances and resorted to dramatization of social conflicts, and the pantomimic abuse of the colonial masters and village deviants. Stripping the performances of the activities abhored by both church and state meant puncturing the virtue of the ritual, eventually causing a change in the intent of the performances. The intent of the performers shifted from expectation of results from supernatural forces to expectation of appreciation from a conventional audience. In the ancient period of the masquerade ritual the intent of both the masquerader, the dancers, and the onlookers was the same — to communicate with supernatural forces in order to change the course of events. The audience were the supernatural forces being addressed. Intent, therefore, is the major difference between ritual and theatre.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion which one can reasonably reach from this treatise is that in discussing origins of traditional African festival drama, one needs a more comprehensive and empirical research into the origins of various enactments, to trace them back to their root in ancient ritual. Mere eurocentric analyses of the surviving performance hardly yield concrete results. Western theatre and Igbo masquerade drama may have developed in different ways, but they both have a common origin — ancestral worship and the urge to communicate.

It is evident from the foregoing that man’s urge to communicate (even if the aim of the communication is to worship) increases the urge to
narrate and this, in turn, fosters the desire to modulate voice, enact action, and generate spectacle.

NOTES

5. Kirby, p. xiii.
10. This investigation and participant-observation were carried out in Awka, Nri, and Nsukka areas of Igboland by this investigator.
11. In his doctoral dissertation, ‘The Development of the Igbo Masquerader as a Dramatic Character’ (Northwestern University, 1981), Oseloka Osadebe traces the new form of the incarnate dead to the *egwugwu* which, he believes, originated from Igala. There is an apparent misunderstanding here. First, the northerly connection on which Osadebe based his thesis took place in the eighteenth century. Therefore, the *egwugwu* whose form originated from Ida must have been different from original Igbo masquerades, the type described by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, for instance. Second, if the *egwugwu* was a device imported in the eighteenth century to manipulate the Onitsha people for political ends (p. 50), then Osadebe’s *egwugwu* is not a part of Igbo ancestral spirits, and should be excluded from any meaningful discussion of Igbo incarnate dead. It is therefore no wonder that in his analysis, Osadebe discovered that this category of masquerades could not change (p. 172).

   Finally, it may be necessary to re-examine the authenticity of the north-south contact as a means of establishing origins in Igboland. The north-south contact, a theory started by M.D.W. Jeffreys in his Intelligence Report written in the 1930s, became a reference point for scholars trying to establish origins of different aspects of Igbo culture. Recently, Afigbo has reported that ‘the theoretical assumptions on which this report was based have been completely discredited by recent research’. (See A.E. Afigbo, ‘On the Threshold of Igbo History’, in *Echeruo and Obiechina, eds., Igbo Traditional Life, Culture and Literature* (Owerri: Conch Magazine Ltd., 1971), pp. 210-211.)
Jude C. Ogu

THE CASE

The elders gathered
And ate the kola nuts
Mixed with alligator pepper.
Then the case opened.

Now, woman
Why have you invited
The elders of the land
This early morning?

I want to share wealth
With my idle husband
Who is too lazy to work
And squanders my wealth.

Wise woman!
Now, take all the things
That belong to you
In this house.